

# *The EU as an International Actor: Lessons from the China Arms Embargo Debate*

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## **Abstract**

*Much of the literature on the European Union's development as an international actor has focused on either the institutionalisation of foreign policymaking or what type of actor the EU can be regarded as. This paper seeks to examine a dimension which has received comparatively less attention: how other actors in the international arena view the EU. Recognition is a prerequisite for the EU to become a credible international actor. Through examining the EU's debate over lifting its China arms embargo, this paper reflects on the impact of the debate on the views of the EU held by two other significant actors – the USA and the PRC – and the implications for the EU. The literature on the arms embargo debate has tended to treat it as a case study of EU foreign policymaking or as an issue in EU-China relations. Little has been said about the broader implications for the image of the EU in the eyes of others. Through analysis of the debate's context and subsequent developments in EU-US and EU-China relations, an evaluation is made of whether the debate can be considered as a setback for developing EU 'actorness' and what, if any, lessons have been learned by policymakers.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The development of the European Union as an international actor is much debated within both policymaking circles and academic literature on EU foreign policy. Much of the literature has focused on either the institutionalisation of EU foreign policymaking structures or on what type of actor (if any) the EU can be considered to represent. This paper seeks to contribute to the examination of another dimension of considerable importance, which has arguably received comparatively less attention: the extent to which other actors in the international arena view the EU as an actual international actor. Such recognition is essentially a prerequisite if the EU is to attain the status of credible international actor. By examining the case of the EU's debate over lifting its arms embargo on China, this paper reflects on the impact of the debate on the views of the EU held by two other key international actors – the United States of America (given its significant involvement in the debate) and the People's Republic of China – and the implications for the EU.

The relevance of examining American and Chinese perspectives extends beyond their centrality to the arms embargo debate. The US is the established dominant power of the international system, if not outright hegemon, and has been stable in this position since the end of the Cold War. Consequently, it has a tendency to identify its interests with the interests of the world. It was previously responsible for guaranteeing the security of Western Europe during the Cold War and is the traditional ally of these states. Its power has been argued to be in relative decline due to the 'rise of the rest' (which includes the EU and China). The emergence of a more independent European foreign policy which may run contrary to certain aspects of American policy presents potential challenges for the US.

In the case of China, it is not a traditional ally of the EU although does have historical ties with certain Member States. Its own 'rise' since the end of the Cold War has essentially coincided with the EU's development as a distinctive presence in the international arena. Thus,

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its own experiences with the EU are significantly different to that of the US, and its emergence as a new power implies that it surveys the international setting – and the actors within it – from a different perspective. The PRC also conceptualises world order in a different way to the US and even the EU. China has no direct security interests in Europe and *vice versa* and the two have no overlapping spheres of influence. Against this background, there may be substantive differences between the US and China in terms of how they view the EU.

The European Union's<sup>2</sup> arms embargo originated in the response to the violent suppression of protestors around Tiananmen Square on the fourth of June, 1989. The EU condemned, via a Council Declaration, the killings and called on China to respect the human rights of its citizens (European Council, 1989). The Declaration listed the various responses to be adopted by the EU which included the “interruption by the Member States... of military cooperation and *an embargo on trade in arms with China*” (European Council, 1989 [emphasis added]). In the US, President George H.W. Bush imposed an arms embargo on the same grounds. These policies remained in place thereafter, with no evidence of a shift in policy preferences until the proposal to lift the EU's embargo came in late 2003. The EU internally debated the issue throughout 2004, and a transatlantic debate emerged from late 2004, when it looked like the EU was heading towards consensus to lift, until the spring of 2005, when the proposal appeared to die.

The existing literature on the arms embargo debate has tended to treat it as a case study of EU foreign policymaking and/or as a key issue in EU-China relations (see for example, Casarini 2006; Stumbaum, 2009). To date little has been said about the broader implications for the image of the EU as an international actor in its own right in the eyes of the US and China. The embargo debate is an interesting case because security, economic and human rights issues were at stake, thus applicable to different facets of the EU's international actorness. Through analysis of the context of the debate and developments in EU-US and EU-China relations since, this paper will evaluate the extent to which the debate can be considered as a setback for the development of the EU's actorness in international affairs and what, if any, lessons have been learned by policymakers in relation to handling potentially contentious issues such as the lifting of the

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<sup>2</sup> As is common in the literature, ‘European Union’ or ‘EU’ is used even in reference to the period before this name was adopted.

China arms embargo. Interviews conducted by this author in the summer of 2010 in the EU and the US will provide insights into these developments.

First, it is useful to briefly review the literature on the EU as an international actor and on outsider's perceptions of the EU. The third section explores American and Chinese perspectives of the EU as an actor in the lead up to the arms embargo debate. This is followed by a summary of the proceedings of the arms embargo debate between late 2003 and the spring of 2005 which highlights possible reasons for outsiders' images of the EU changing. The fifth section examines how American and Chinese perspectives of the EU as an international actor changed following the debate and the wider implications for the EU's 'actorness'. The paper concludes that while the debate was undoubtedly a setback for the EU, developments in relations since suggest that this was temporary, particularly given the largely positive responses of the US and China to the developments of the EU's external representation introduced by the Lisbon Treaty.

### **The EU as an International Actor**

This section provides a brief review of the main academic literature on the EU's 'actorness'. The debate on what 'type' of actor the EU is reveals little consensus among scholars except that for most, its importance to international relations is now beyond doubt and it has a distinctive presence. However, these characterisations are predominantly found in academic literature, and while undoubtedly useful for conceptualising the EU, they rarely are used in studies of outsiders' perspectives. Consideration of the literature on external perspectives reveals that these various models do not bear relevance to the main ways in which external actors understand the EU's international presence.

Some scholars have argued that the EU is *not* an international actor at all, although this perspective has to an extent faded in recent years. Neorealists would argue that the Member States remain the predominant actors as they will override their commitment to the EU when self-interest demands it. Hedley Bull (1982) critiqued the concept of Europe as an international actor with 'civilian power' (discussed below), arguing that the Western European states should concentrate on developing their own military capabilities. However, some realist scholars such as

Adrian Hyde-Price (2008) have acknowledged that the EU is at least *perceived* to play an important and distinctive role, although remain sceptical of the potential for coherent action. Barry Posen (2006) argued that the ESDP project can be seen as a weak form of balancing behaviour against the preponderance of US power, giving the EU more leverage in the transatlantic relationship.

The expansion of the EU's institutional capacity for external action and developing presence has led to a proliferation of literature analysing its 'actorness'. The concept of the EU as a 'civilian' power – lacking military force and instead reliant on civilian instruments and values – has been a particularly influential model. 'Civilian power' Europe's key proponent, François Duchêne, was sceptical of the EU's ability to become a military power or to develop a regional sphere of influence (1972: 38). However, it had potential as a civilian centre of power, facilitating greater EU influence in a world with increasing interdependence (Duchêne, 1972: 43). The 'civilian' aspect does not just cover policy instruments, but can also cover the ends of policy, which Karen Smith (2008: 22) identifies as "international cooperation, solidarity, domestication of international relations... responsibility for the global environment, and the diffusion of equality, justice and tolerance". Thus, having civilian power enables the EU to impact on a broad range of issue areas.

Ian Manners' 'normative power Europe' is used to critique discussions of the EU as either military or civilian power given their state-centric perspectives which concentrate on assessing 'state-like' qualities. Manners rejected the realist/materialist notion that normative power only has efficacy when there is a military capability with which it can be implemented, arguing that it is a distinctive form of power in its own right (2002: 242). The very existence of the EU "changes the norms, standards and prescriptions of world politics away from the bounded expectations of state-centricity" (Manners, 2008a: 45). However, there are limitations to the EU's ability to promote norms in the international arena: "diffusion of ideas in a normatively sustainable way" takes time; the nature of the post-9/11 international climate is much less welcoming to the concept of a norms-based international system; the fact that certain actors – including the US and China – consider themselves to be "above international norms and law";

and finally normative power requires other actors to recognise the “*universality* of such norms” (Manners, 2008b: 37).

The concept of the EU as a strategic actor has also surfaced. Michael Smith (1998) applied this term to the EU’s involvement in the international political economy. Jolyon Howorth (2010) argued that the dynamics of international relations in the post-Cold War era enabled the EU to derive influence from its non-hard power sources. Although Howorth advocates the EU as a future strategic actor, the article refrains from claiming that the EU is already one. Nevertheless, Howorth considers the Lisbon Treaty provisions to represent steps in the right direction. Juha Jokela (2009: 40-1) notes that the *European Security Strategy* was a clear indication that the EU intends to become a strategic actor and how it will be situated in relation to other international actors. In the *ESS*, the EU articulated its global ambitions and stressed the importance of ‘strategic partnerships’ with emerging powers such as China. However, what these partnerships entail and how they will be operationalised remains relatively unclear (Whitman, 2010: 27).

While these contributions address the question of what the EU *is*, they rarely consider how external actors (‘outsiders’) view the EU. There is a body of literature now established by a relatively small number of academics which takes on this issue, with their most substantive contributions surfacing over the past few years. It is useful to briefly examine these contributions, as this paper essentially seeks to build on their analyses of external images of the EU by examining whether the case of the China arms embargo debate led to the actors involved – the US and China – altering their views of the EU in the international arena. So far, such analysis has been absent from the literature.

Chaban et al (2006) make the case for why outsiders’ views of the EU are worth scholarly attention. First, they provide insights into how the EU is judged on the international stage and how well its policy objectives are translated into practice (Chaban et al, 2006: 247). Second, these views have an impact on the EU’s identity and the roles it plays in international affairs through “continuous interaction” (Chaban et al, 2006: 247): how other actors perceive the EU and respond to it has an impact on the development of its identity and policy. Finally, images of the EU will determine the impact of foreign policy; without being recognised as a legitimate,

coherent actor the EU's policy will be of little importance to others (Chaban et al, 2006: 248). This latter point is particularly salient in the context of the EU attempting to engage with two of the most important international actors at the present time. This underpinning logic is often made explicit in the other studies referenced here.

Chaban et al (2006) compare two studies carried out between 2004 and 2005 which focus on elite views of the EU. One was issue-specific (the EU's role in multilateral negotiations); the other country-specific (views of the EU in Australia, New Zealand and Thailand). Their results indicated that on issue-specific views of the EU there was great coherence between respondents (Chaban et al, 2006: 250). Asia-Pacific policy elites' views on the EU generally indicated that the EU was commonly identified as an economic actor, but respondents from different countries were divided on the extent of the EU's political power (Chaban et al, 2006: 254-5). This indicates the possibility of divergent views of the EU dependent on the actors in question and the issue at hand as different actors will be predisposed to view the EU in different ways depending on the nature of the relationship.

Some of the most interesting and recent literature on external views of the EU have seen various studies and surveys collated into single volumes, allowing for cross-cutting analyses to determine similarities and/or differences. Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010) compiled works looking at the views of the EU from established and rising powers (the US, Russia, China, Brazil and India); Middle Eastern countries (Iran, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine) and also a number of international organisations and regional institutions. The study revealed that the EU is generally seen as a fragmented political actor (where it is viewed as a political actor at all) but most commonly as an economic actor (Fioramonti and Lucarelli, 2010: 220). The other study, convened by Chaban and Holland (2008) takes in the views of Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, South Korea and Thailand. This study found that, at the elite level, the EU's "economic prowess was widely acknowledged by Asia-Pacific elites" but again there was no strong perception of the EU as a political actor (Bain et al, 2008: 204-205).

Elsewhere in the literature on policymakers' perceptions of the EU, again we find the recurring conclusion is that the EU is predominantly an economic power: policy elites in Canada,

(Croci and Tossutti, 2007) Egypt (Bayoumi, 2007), Brazil, India and South Africa (Fioramonti and Poletti, 2008) all reportedly hold this view. In the latter study, the investigators found that in India and South Africa the EU was seen to perpetuate Western domination, thus ‘economic power’ was a negative conceptualisation (Fioramonti and Poletti, 2008: 177-8). The author has found no reference in the literature to the arms embargo case as an important event for developing perceptions of the EU, and it is by exploring this avenue that the paper seeks to make a contribution to the literature.

The above studies have common traits. Most are based on surveys and/or interviews with policy elites and studies of official documents, the results of which are subjected to quantitative and qualitative analyses. While these approaches are to be commended, this paper suggests another way of looking at how outsiders view the EU: by examining not only say, but by considering what they do. The existing literature on outsiders’ perspectives does not look at change in perceptions as a result of key events, which is argued here may be an appropriate way of examining how and why perceptions change over a relatively short period of time.

The literature examining how the EU is viewed by others is now expanding, yet relatively few studies have paid attention to the views of the US (e.g. Sperling, 2010) and China (e.g. Morini et al, 2010), which is surprising given their importance on the international scene. Further, despite the fact that the arms embargo debate occurred just before this proliferation of research on outsiders’ views of the EU, no analysis of the debate’s impact has been forthcoming. This presents an interesting opportunity to examine how two important but very different international actors conceptualise the EU. The EU’s international presence is still very much in development and so it is to be expected that outsiders’ views will change over time; whether these views will manage to keep pace with the EU’s developments is another question. The rest of this paper will examine American and Chinese perceptions of the EU and how the arms embargo debate impacted upon their views.



## **American and Chinese Perspectives of the EU ‘Pre-Debate’**

This section outlines how the EU was viewed by the US and China prior to the arms embargo debate. The analysis begins in 1993 to coincide with the Treaty of the European Union entering into force, and the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy pillar which enhanced the EU’s capacity for international action. Between 1993 and late 2003 when the proposal to lift the embargo was announced, the EU’s ‘actorness’ was in flux, with varying results for how American and Chinese perceptions. The EU’s inability to prevent the Kosovo crisis and the internal dispute over Iraq had a negative impact on US perspectives, whereas China’s publication of an EU policy paper and the launch of the strategic partnership indicated that the concept of the EU as an international actor was gaining acceptance amongst PRC policymakers.

### *US Perspectives*

Despite the extent of the EU-US relationship, it was not until 1990 that the cooperative relationship was formalised by the Transatlantic Declaration on EC-US Relations (EEAS, 2011). In the early years after the Cold War, the absence of an overriding threat to European security meant that although Europe remained an important factor in American foreign policy, it was not the top priority. The establishment of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) in 1993 led to the US recognising the increasing importance of the EU as an international actor in its own right. This is reflected in the US-EU New Transatlantic Agenda document of 1995, which shifted the focus from the Transatlantic Declaration’s terminology of the ‘European Community and its Member States’ to the ‘European Union’, a change which “implicitly recognises the character of the EU as a major international actor” (Monteleone, 2009: 92).

Due to the absence of a Soviet threat and relative tranquillity in Europe in the first few years of the post-Cold War era, there were few substantive security/foreign policy issues on the US-EU agenda. However, the US’ views of the EU as an international actor were called into question by the middle of the decade. Philip Gordon (1997/98: 74-5) noted that US policymakers

saw the EU's attempts to become more involved in dealing with foreign and security issues had largely been ineffective even within its own region, as demonstrated by the necessity of US involvement in the peace negotiations with the former Yugoslavia and diplomatic intervention between Greece and Turkey over Aegean Island.

The EU's failure to resolve the conflict in Bosnia in 1995 had negative implications for American views, as the US' involvement was necessitated to save NATO's credibility and demonstrated that the Europeans were essentially incapable of dealing with crises on their own doorstep (Dunn, 2009: 16). Following the later failure to prevent the escalation of the Kosovo crisis, the idea that the EU needed to develop its capacity to act within the security sphere became increasingly salient amongst European policymakers. This led to the St Malo Declaration between France and the UK which outlined plans to pursue these aims (Cornish and Edwards, 2001: 588; Shepherd, 2009: 520) and opened the door for the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in an attempt to restore the EU's credibility, particularly in the eyes of the US, who essentially took over in the absence of a European capacity for leadership.

The creation of the ESDP was seen in the US as a potential challenge to the dominance of NATO, and therefore there was some concern about the direction the EU was headed in. Although the US in principle supported a more coherent EU international presence, the apparent response was that ESDP was one step too far: the Clinton administration focused on the negative consequences of "*decoupling* Europe from the US, *discrimination* against NATO allies which are not EU members, and *duplication* of efforts and capabilities" (Cornish and Edwards, 2001: 592 [original emphasis]). When the Bush administration took office in 2001, its position on ESDP efforts varied from support to opposition (Cornish and Edwards, 2001: 592), with the result that the American perspective of the EU at this time was somewhat ambiguous.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> presented significant challenges to the EU's developing capacity for action in international security affairs. Den Boer and Monar (2002: 11) identified three in particular: The need to be a "credible partner of the US in a situation of crisis, make an effective contribution to international political and military action against global terrorism, and

to upgrade its own internal security measures and capabilities in the face of a dramatically increased terrorist threat”. The EU immediately expressed its support for the US in confronting international terrorism, and shortly after contributed to military action in Afghanistan (Bono, 2004: 445). Continued cooperation in the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and the involvement in the Quartet process in the Middle East were areas in which the EU was identified as an important partner for facilitating peace and stability (Schnabel, 2002/2003: 96).

However, the EU’s position during the build-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq was vastly different. The EU was split over whether to support the invasion or not; France and Germany were two of the strongest opponents while the UK was a strong supporter. This opposition brought about a “dramatic end [to] the post-war transatlantic bargain – that of American leadership and European deference in exchange for a military security guarantee in Europe and beyond” (Dunn, 2009: 5). Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld made reference to those who opposed the war (France, Germany and Belgium amongst others) as ‘old Europe’ and the supporters (the UK, Italy, Spain and the US-leaning Eastern European candidate countries) as ‘new Europe’ (Bono, 2004: 445), playing on the internal divisions in Europe. The US’ response illustrates views of the transatlantic relationship: the EU is the junior partner, and is expected to fall in line. Historically, American and European worldviews were similar, and such an important split in policy preferences served as a wake-up call to Americans that the EU’s perspective of the global arena was now diverging from its own.

### *Chinese Perspectives*

As mentioned above, there is reasonable basis for expecting that China’s perspective on the EU as an international actor will be qualitatively different from that of the US. Historical experiences and the changing position of China in the international arena over a relatively short space of time are argued here to matter. The fact that China did not articulate its policy towards the EU until 2003 indicates there was little perceived need for a full-blown policy since the most important dimension of the relationship was trade. However, evolving Chinese views of the EU indicated an increasing acceptance of the EU as an international actor up until the arms embargo debate.

In the early 1990s, there was little in the way of political engagement between the EU and China. The biggest political issues were related to particular Member States: French arms sales to Taiwan up until 1994 (Shambaugh, 1996: 20); negotiations with the UK and Portugal on the impending handover of Hong Kong and Macau respectively (Hook and Neves, 2002). Arguably the largest political issue in EU-China relations was that of human rights, on which the EU would act collectively: the annual attempts to censure China for its human rights record at the UN Human Rights Commission. As such, the political weight of the EU had negative consequences for China. However, by adopting a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy through offering incentives to certain Member States for abandoning the censure motions, China managed to end these annual EU efforts, illustrating how weak a political actor the EU remained when appeals were made to national interests.

It is of no surprise then that the Chinese view of the EU at least until the early twenty-first century was primarily that of an economic actor in the international arena. The bilateral trade relationship developed far quicker than almost any other dimension of their ties, with the EU becoming a key market for Chinese exports. However, as trade burgeoned, the EU was pushing for greater recognition as an important international player from the PRC. The EU had produced four China policy papers between 1995 and 2003, and at the time China did not see the need for an EU policy, therefore Europeans effectively had to “sell” the concept to the Chinese over a period of time (El-Agraa, 2007: 199).

The Chinese leadership increasingly came to see the EU as a potentially useful political partner. The benefit of a close relationship with the European Union from China’s perspective is that it is conducive to the pursuit of a multipolar system and creates a “bridge” to facilitate China’s emergence in the US-dominated international system at its own pace and since the US has often portrayed China as a ‘threat’ whereas Europeans have not (Clegg, 2009: 132). China considers itself and the EU to be potential poles in a multipolar system, thus the EU’s developing international presence is conducive to this end. This view has been reinforced by France – particularly under Chirac – often echoing the desire for multipolarity and arguably attempting to

pursue this end by guiding EU foreign policy in a way that promotes links with other emerging powers.

On Iraq, France and Germany shared China's anti-war stance, but the internal divisions – particularly with the UK as firmly in support of the US – did not seem to have the same negative implications for China's approach to the EU as it did in the case of the US. While the US emphasised the differences (the old/new Europe characterisation), China was able to overlook these in pursuit of closer political relations. 2003 saw the launch of the EU-China strategic partnership and the publication of China's first policy document on the EU in the October of that year. The document identifies the EU as a "major force in the world" which "will play an increasingly important role in both regional and international affairs" (MoFA, 2003). It is noted that China and the EU do not have conflicting interests and do not pose a threat to each other, which paves the way for a cooperative relationship.

The establishment of the EU-China strategic partnership in 2003 was intended to upgrade relations further. The EU made efforts to stress that the term 'strategic' did not indicate a "partnership aimed at counterbalancing US regional and global influence", but rather it means comprehensive of the EU-China bilateral relationship (Berkofsky, 2006: 104-5), in what appears to be an attempt to assuage US concerns. Undoubtedly, the perceived importance of the strategic partnership was greater on the part of the EU than for China, as the former expected this to facilitate greater discussion of key issues, while the latter anticipated it would result in less discussion (Mattlin, 2009: 104), shielding the PRC leadership from pressure on sensitive topics.

Around the same time, China's agreement with the EU on cooperation in the Galileo project<sup>3</sup> and the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) signified new heights in the EU-China relationship (Clegg, 2009: 133). In short, by late 2003 China-EU relations were arguably at their most extensive following a period in which, for China at least, the EU was primarily an economic actor in the international arena. Both sides apparently shared a desire to

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<sup>3</sup> This raised concerns for the US. China's access to sophisticated satellite technology with potential military application may significantly enhance China's strategic capabilities. Additionally, Galileo was a potential rival to the US' own Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) system.

develop the partnership further. It was in this environment in which China started to push more strongly for the lifting of the EU's arms embargo, in place since 1989.

### **The EU Arms Embargo Debate**

This section briefly gives an overview of the arms embargo debate<sup>4</sup> within Europe and between the EU and the US, which can be regarded as the 'real' debate over the arms embargo. This develops an understanding of firstly the EU's intentions regarding the embargo (i.e. why the proposal to lift came about), why China sought to have the embargo lifted, and the grounds for the US' intense objection to the move. By outlining these positions and understanding the context of the debate, it is possible to examine the views of the EU as an international actor held by the US and China at that time, and also start to explore how the debate itself led to shifts in their perceptions of the EU.

The desire to remove the embargo was not new. China had long sought to have the embargo removed, and there are indications that some within the EU had considered the idea before (Stumbaum, 2009: 171), but not seriously enough to make a move on the issue. However, China's EU policy paper stated that the "EU should lift its ban on arms sales to China at an early date so as to remove barriers to greater bilateral cooperation on defence industry and technologies" (MoFA, 2003). On a symbolic level, the embargo was seen as a relic of the Cold War, discriminatory and interference with China's domestic affairs (Vennesson: 2007, 426-427). Additionally, Chinese officials stated that they were not interested in buying weapons from Europe (Casarini, 2007: 375) – although did not rule out dual-use technology – which was a key concern for the US.

On another level, the request to have the embargo may have represented a 'test' by the PRC to determine to what extent the EU was committed to the strategic partnership, although there were obviously no public declarations of such a position. Rather, China stressed that maintaining the arms embargo was inconsistent with the development of a strategic partnership,

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<sup>4</sup> An exhaustive account of the internal dynamics of the EU's debate is beyond the scope of this paper. For detailed analyses, see for instance Casarini (2007) and Stumbaum (2009).

and its removal was a prerequisite for even closer relations. In this sense, the embargo case was a test of the EU's actorness to some degree, and the perceived failure of the EU illustrated that Member States continue to prevail.

The move to lift the embargo was initiated by France and Germany at the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) meeting of December 2003. However, prior to this particular meeting President Chirac had given the PRC leadership assurances that the embargo could be removed quickly without actually taking into account the position of the other Member States or indeed third parties such as the US. Chirac seems to have either overestimated his own clout within the EU, or underestimated the potential opposition to the proposal. One interviewee indicated that at the time, Chirac perceived the US as a 'weakened' international actor as consequence of the disputes surrounding the invasion of Iraq; thus creating an environment in which discussing this move was feasible<sup>5</sup>. As such, Chirac spoke authoritatively on the matter, conveying the impression that the EU would be behind the proposal, indicating unity and coherence in its external relations. This would later be problematic for Chinese impressions of the EU as the internal divisions (indefinitely) delayed the embargo's end.

While France was the first to propose lifting the embargo, others such as Germany also favoured the move, and the UK eventually came round to support the idea in May 2004 as confirmed by then Foreign Minister Jack Straw (Casarini, 2006: 31). Reportedly, the national governments of both France and Germany perceived improvements in China's human rights record which was still not excellent, but enough to render ostracising China along with the likes of Burma and Zimbabwe inappropriate due to its increasing international importance (Cabestan, 2007: 138). As China was a strategic partner, and more importantly one which seemed to recognise the EU as a strategic partner/actor in return, arguments were made that the EU could not sustain this policy.

The division within the EU on the matter was based on different perspectives on what mattered most in EU-China relations. Those in favour of lifting apparently prioritised economic concerns and good relations with China. Human rights, regional stability and cross-Strait

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<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 01/06/2010

relations were absent from their considerations, at least in the early stages of the debate<sup>6</sup>. Those in the EU who favoured retaining the ban focused on human rights concerns, while the issues of Taiwan's security and regional stability tended to be concerns of the US (Archick et al, 2005: 31). This was perhaps predictable because the EU had no comparable regional role as the US; however US critics were apparently surprised that their European allies would fail to recognise the problems lifting the embargo would cause. The lack of EU involvement in regional security meant that the underlying logic of the embargo had not been reinforced by changes in China's relative power as it had for the US.

As the debate rumbled on throughout 2004 and into 2005, the US' opposition intensified when it looked like the EU was approaching a consensus to lift. The main motivations for opposing the move were that the original reasons for imposition – protection of human rights – were still of sufficient concern; to deny China access to high-end technology with military applications; and the maintenance of the US' relative power advantage over China<sup>7</sup>. On a symbolic level, the US argued that lifting without conditionality would send the wrong message to China. Additionally, if the EU's embargo disappeared, the PRC would argue that the US was the only actor that believed China was a threat to Taiwan in an attempt to pressure the US to drop its protective stance towards the island<sup>8</sup>. Given that the EU continued to press on building consensus, it appears that the US' arguments were not accepted by European policymakers, which served to weaken US perceptions of the EU as a responsible international actor.

The adoption of the Anti-Secession Law (ASL) by the PRC in March 2005 – which affirmed that “[t]he state shall never allow the “Taiwan independence” secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means” (China Daily, 2005) – was perceived by some in the EU and US as evidence of China's hostile intentions towards Taiwan. The ASL effectively ended the chances of the EU being able to take a decision by June 2005, particularly as the UK reverted to opposing the move. The EU had dispatched a delegation to Washington in a bid to persuade the US to drop its opposition. Their arrival coincided with the

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<sup>6</sup> As the debate progressed, there were more frequent calls for China to give a ‘positive signal’ on human rights that would ease the lifting of the embargo, although formal conditionality was not implemented.

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Dennis Wilder, Washington DC, 15/07/2010

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Dennis Wilder, Washington DC, 15/07/2010



introduction of the ASL and the delegation found itself on the defensive in what became an embarrassing situation for the EU<sup>9</sup>. Developments in the EU-China relationship had created a permissive environment allowing for consideration of lifting the embargo, but this evaporated when the US' disapproval and China's actions (passage of the ASL) led to a shift in considerations of the 'appropriateness' of lifting the embargo at that time. Chances of returning to the issue in the near future were constrained when new Chancellor Angela Merkel officially switched Germany's stance on the issue.

### **American and Chinese Perspectives of the EU 'Post-Debate'**

This section seeks to address the question of the extent to which the arms embargo debate impacted upon American and Chinese perspectives of the EU. The previous section highlighted some of the issues that the dispute threw up, but only by analysing the developments in policy since can the extent of the embargo's implications be comprehended. One caveat would be that these implications are not necessarily long-term; at the time of writing, less than six years have passed since the end of the debate. Nevertheless, shifts in perspectives even over the short-term are of significance during a period in which the EU has been attempting to consolidate its international presence.

#### *US Perspectives*

The predominant view amongst US policymakers was that the EU Member States who sought the end of the embargo were acting irresponsibly. At first, it appeared that the EU may not have been aware of US concerns, which may have been consequential of the US' failure to convey these concerns effectively in the years before the debate<sup>10</sup>. Americans had not recognised the reality that the previous 'closeness' between American and European perceptions of the global security environment – forged during the Cold War – were now diverging<sup>11</sup>, even after the experience in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 28/05/2010

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Randy Schriver, Arlington VA, 07/07/2010; Author's interview with Dennis Wilder, Washington DC, 15/07/2010

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with US China Analyst, Alexandria VA, 02/07/2010

Previously, US policymakers were under the impression that European views on the necessity of the arms embargo matched their own. US policymakers saw two possible explanations for why certain actors in the EU had failed to understand their position on the embargo. Firstly, the EU simply was not aware of the US' security concerns that were entangled with the arms embargo and the absence of an EU presence in the Asia-Pacific meant that their understanding of the situation was limited. The other possibility was that those who favoured lifting were aware of the issues, but chose to ignore them for economic gain, although one interviewee indicated that they could not believe this would be the case, as despite differences, the EU and the US remain allies<sup>12</sup>.

At the very least, the fact that the EU had raised the issue of lifting the arms embargo – and continued to pursue the proposal after the US had voiced considerable opposition – was deleterious for American views of the EU as a responsible international actor and served to highlight the continued importance of the Member States. The EU attempted to reassure the Americans on its concerns, but these efforts were not well received. The fact that the EU delegation dispatched to Washington to assuage concerns on the day that the ASL was passed by China only further underlined the weakness of the EU as a political actor.

A further consequence was that the EU failed to enhance its visibility as a credible international actor in its own right. Due to the internal divisions between Member States on the issue, the US applied substantial pressure at the national level amongst those states which would be inclined to support the US. The role of the EU3 in the debate – France and Germany as key proponents of the move while the UK's eventual 'switch' to oppose the move was a critical juncture – reinforced American views that their governments were still the key interlocutors in the EU. The fact that the EU's attempt to lift the embargo was essentially ad-hoc and resulted in very public disagreements between key Member States further undermined US perceptions of the EU as a credible international actor<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with former senior US administration official, Washington DC, 15/07/2010

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 01/06/2010

One of the first steps taken after the debate ended was the establishment of the US-EU Strategic Dialogue on East Asia. The US was initially keen to engage in such dialogue as an opportunity to convey their regional security concerns to their EU allies, in the hope that their perspectives on such matters could converge once more. EU policymakers were wary of the dialogue being employed as a platform by the US to ‘educate’ them and instead sought to use the dialogue as a way to explain their position to their US counterparts<sup>14</sup>. The dialogue, however, has not been sustained. This perhaps underlines the fact that the US does not consider the EU as a key international actor, at least in relation to certain international security issues.

However, the debate did not entirely undermine the EU’s international actorness. If anything, the strength of US responses indicates how important EU foreign policy decisions may be if and when consensus is reached. What was damaged was the perception of the EU as a ‘responsible’ international actor which still appears to be a byword for supportive of the US’ position. More recently, US policymakers have welcomed the changes to the EU’s external representation brought about by the Lisbon Treaty, indicating that the US favours a strong, coherent EU in the international arena. However, it is too early to determine the impact of these reforms on US perceptions of the EU as an international actor.

### *Chinese Perspectives*

The main consequence of the arms embargo debate from China’s perspective was that it highlighted how divided the EU remained in foreign affairs. Despite talk of the strategic partnership and deepening of EU-China relations, the EU was incapable of acting coherently on international stage. This resulted from the EU’s (or more accurately, Chirac’s) broken promises with regard to the ‘swift’ removal of the embargo. Although the EU had initially resisted US pressure and it was with the advent of the ASL that the proposal to lift lost momentum, the Chinese leadership saw the EU as bowing to US demands, although apparently accepted that lifting at that time had become too politically contentious.

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<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 04/06/2010

Stumbaum (2009: 83) has argued that the failure to reach a decision on the embargo at resulted in the “re-bilateralisation” of relations between Member States and China<sup>15</sup> particularly on foreign and security issues although the EU remained the important point of contact on economic matters<sup>16</sup>. This is potentially divisive for conceptualisations of a common EU foreign policy and weakens the efficacy of EU ‘actorness’ in relations with China, and consequently in the international arena broadly. It also has the potential to reorient Member State foreign policy away from the EU level if they perceive their interests as best served by their own efforts rather than attempting to foster a common policy. Overall, the conduct of the debate and the failure to reach a firm decision has damaged the perception of the EU as a coherent international actor in the eyes of China<sup>17</sup>.

The arms embargo has not been forgotten by the PRC, and there have been periodic attempts by the Chinese to kick-start the process once more, although none of these have amounted to anything so far. Other issues – such as the EU’s refusal to grant Market Economy Status (MES) – is still sensitive for China, reinforcing the perception that certain protectionist Member States can dominate the EU’s economic policy. One possible advantage for China is that if the EU granted MES then this would add pressure for the US to do the same (Rémond, 2007: 348); suggesting that China’s EU policy is partly constructed in light of its approach to the US. Additionally, MES holds symbolic importance to the Chinese leadership, who see it is a form of discrimination and long to be treated as equals. China thus argues that granting of MES is necessary if the EU wants to develop their strategic partnership further (Rémond, 2007: 348).

As with the case of the US, however, the damage done does not appear to have been permanent. A clear example of this was agreement to further upgrade the EU-China strategic partnership through a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), the negotiations for which began in 2007. However, China’s non-committal approach to the development of shared political values (Mattlin, 2009: 97) has protracted the process. Undoubtedly, the perceived importance of the strategic partnership is greater on the part of the EU than it is for China, as the former

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<sup>15</sup> This point was also supported in Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 04/06/2010

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 01/06/2010

<sup>17</sup> Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 01/06/2010

expected this to facilitate greater discussion of key issues, while the latter anticipated it would result in less discussion (Mattlin, 2009: 104), shielding the PRC leadership from pressure on sensitive topics.

On the whole, however, China does not appear to view the EU as important as certain actors in the EU would be inclined to believe. Jonathan Holslag has argued that China's engagement of the EU is essentially "function of its own relationship with the United States" and as such treats the EU "as an intermediate player", relegating it to secondary importance in China's foreign policy (Holslag, 2011: 308-9). The arms embargo debate had a negative effect on the extent to which the EU was considered a credible international actor by the Chinese, although this has not been particularly severe, albeit since the starting point was relatively low anyway. China arguably continues to view the EU predominantly as an economic actor, although still displays an interest in enhancing the strategic partnership further, albeit on its own terms.

## **Lessons Learned and Conclusions**

The evidence suggests that few lessons have in fact been learned by EU policymakers from the debate. The failure to maintain the EU-US strategic dialogue on East Asia means that a gap persists between US and EU perspectives on regional security concerns. That is not to say that they should have the same perspectives or that the EU must always follow the US' lead, but the two sides have stated a desire to develop mutual understanding to prevent such disputes in the future. Further, self-interested Member States retain the potential to undermine what progress has been made in the development of a unified EU external policy. The Spanish Presidency suggested in early 2010 that the embargo issue may be revisited, only to have Catherine Ashton sweep the issue back under the carpet<sup>18</sup>. Since the Spanish proposal did not make any substantial headway, there was no need for a response from the US. It seems likely however, that the response would have been the same as previously.

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<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Spanish policy official, Brussels, 31/05/2010

One interesting issue that came up in interviews with European-based officials was that the US had rarely criticised others in relation to arms sales to China<sup>19</sup>. For instance, Australia lifted its arms embargo against China in the 1990s with no consequence for its relationship with the US, and both Russia and Israel are major arms suppliers to China. However, what the EU apparently failed to appreciate is that the US sees the EU as a special case: not subservient to US policy demands, but rather their close alliance precipitates (or should do) common interests and shared values. The EU essentially undermines its own attempts to enhance its international actorness by failing to act like a responsible power in the international arena. The views of interviewees suggest that they have a different take on what constitutes ‘responsible’ behaviour for the EU.

This paper has suggested that outsiders’ views on the EU as an international actor were damaged by the case of the arms embargo debate. The early positive signals to China, the problematic search for consensus, and the messy transatlantic debate all served to weaken the concept of a robust EU international identity. Whitman’s assessment of the EU’s international role notes that the EU’s capacity for action has “increased exponentially in the post-Cold War years” yet the range of actors and institutions involved in the EU’s external representation contribute to complex arrangements which impedes its “influence and impact” (2010: 30). The inability of the involved actors to successfully navigate through these obstacles in the arms embargo debate served to reinforce the problems in managing relations with two of the world’s foremost players. What is interesting is that EU policymakers appear to be aware of this<sup>20</sup>, but little has been done to rectify the situation.

In early 2011, there were reports that the High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, France and Spain have been engaged in discussions to look again at lifting the embargo (EUbusiness, 2010; Korski, 2011). So far, no details have emerged with regard to how the issue will be approached. However, if the issue does make it onto the Foreign Affairs Council’s agenda, how it is handled will arguably be of even greater importance this time round for three main reasons. One, from China’s perspective, failure to lift the embargo would confirm

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<sup>19</sup> Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 04/06/2010

<sup>20</sup> Author’s interview with EU policy official, Brussels, 04/06/2010

the EU's weakness and subservience to the US' wishes. Two, from the American perspective, failure to engage in dialogue with the US at the earliest opportunity, attach formal conditionality for lifting and introduce concrete controls over dual-use technology transfers will probably result in the same response as the 2004/5 debate. Third, if Ashton comes out in favour of lifting the embargo – as seems plausible – but fails to receive support from the Member States (the UK and possibly Germany will be the main challenges this time), this could have serious implications for her own credibility and, moreover, the credibility of her position. This would also show that the Lisbon Treaty has not been particularly successful at addressing the problems of the EU's external representation. In short, the EU risks exposing the same weaknesses in its international actorness as it did when the debate first arose. On the other hand, successful navigation to a conclusion acceptable to all parties (whatever that may be) may underpin new perceptions of the EU as a serious international actor.

The implications of the arms embargo debate for outsiders' views of the EU's 'actorness' have been deleterious in the short-term. The US became more sceptical of the EU's ability to act seriously in international security and reinforced the view that continued divisions between the Member States precluded a consistent EU international presence. The debate was a blow for the nascent EU-China strategic partnership, and the failure to deliver on promises led to a 'rebilateralisation' at the Member State level in China's foreign policy towards the EU. However, this trend appears to have been relatively short-lived, with a return to focussing on the EU-level after a few years. It is still too soon to determine what long-term impact the debate will have had for the EU, which will partly depend on the lessons learned by EU policymakers and how the matter is handled in the future, as the embargo remains a bone of contention for all parties involved.

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